

# THE HEGELIAN INVERSION: ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A MARXIST DIALECTIC

RONALD A. KIEVE

## *Introduction*

ANY ATTEMPT TO CLARIFY Marx's method invariably involves confronting the problematic relationship between Marx and Hegel. While it is generally conceded that the dialectical method plays a central role in Marx's works, its equally apparent idealist Hegelian origin has been a source of considerable embarrassment to those who see Marx's works as a genuinely scientific contribution to the understanding of the conditions of existence in capitalist society. If there is one thing that contemporary Marxists seem to agree on, it is the need to eradicate every trace of the Hegelian dialectic. Its vestigial remains in Marx's works is sufficient ground for some to call into question their scientific status.<sup>1</sup> It has prompted others to seek to periodize Marx's intellectual development in such a way as to insure the isolation of the "Young" Hegelian-Feuerbachian Marx, still bewitched by the dazzling magic of dialectical reasoning, from the "Mature" Marx, who, at worst, would only permit himself the nostalgic indulgence of "coquetting" with Hegelian phrases.<sup>2</sup> Those more perspicacious among the Marxists who have not been able to ignore the obvious significance of the dialectic

1 Lucio Colletti, "Marxism and the Dialectic," *New Left Review*, 93 (September-October 1975), pp. 3-29.

2 Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, tr. Ben Brewster (New York, 1969), and *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, tr. Ben Brewster (New York, 1971), pp. 71-106.

in Marx's most mature and scientific works, such as *Capital*, have attempted to explain it away by contending that its use is merely metaphorical, a natural stage of any science in its infancy and still groping toward the formulation of adequate scientific concepts and analytical categories, a form of pre-scientific baby-talk, as it were.<sup>3</sup> Still others, not necessarily all Marxists, have sought to secure respectability for the dialectical method by dressing it in pragmatist and generally positivist garb,<sup>4</sup> while those who unreservedly accept the Hegelian dialectic have affirmed it at the expense of reducing Marx to a minor post-Hegelian, of making of Marx's work a mere elaboration of Hegel's philosophy. In this latter interpretation, Marxism is reduced to a special case of Hegelianism by "phenomenologizing" *Capital*. Here, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is merely updated and particularized as the world of human labor is brought fully into the purview of consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most persuasive and damaging argument for the complete irreconcilability of the Hegelian dialectic and Marx's method has come from Lucio Colletti. Colletti contends that the Hegelian system involves the reduction of philosophy to an idealist gnoseology which demands the unreality of matter, and which sets for itself the task of justifying and making logically coherent this quintessentially Christian logos. The argument hinges on demonstrating that inherent in the very structure of Hegel's system is not merely the subordination of the material world to the ideal world, but, more fundamentally, the denial and preclusion of any independent or autonomous existence of an objective material realm of reality. The material world is

3 Karl Korsch, "Die dialektische Methode im 'Kapital'," *Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung und andere Schriften*, ed. Erich Gerlach (Frankfurt am Main, 1971), pp. 178-179; Althusser, "The Object of *Capital*," in Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, tr. Ben Brewster (London, 1970), p. 121; Maurice Godelier, "Structure and Contradiction in *Capital*," in Robin Blackburn, ed., *Ideology in Social Science* (New York, 1972), p. 360.

4 Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx* (Ann Arbor, 1962); Donald Clark Hodges, "The Method of *Capital*," *Science & Society*, 31 (Fall 1967), pp. 505-514; M. Mark Mussachia, "On Contradiction in Dialectical Materialism," *Science & Society*, 41 (Fall 1977), pp. 257-280.

5 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, tr. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 83-222; Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (Boston, 1960), pp. 273-322; Jean Hyppolite, *Studies on Marx and Hegel*, tr. John O'Neill (New York, 1969).



merely the *fata morgana* of finite existence, whose only purpose in the Hegelian system is to provide a point of transcendence for the realization of the true world of the infinite, abstract Absolute. The dialectic itself functions as a *deus ex machina* without which the finite could not be made to vanish into the infinite.<sup>6</sup> If this argument is correct, then the dialectic has no place in a materialist Marxism, and any attempt to "stand Hegel right side up" is a mere delusion.<sup>7</sup> If the dialectic is inherently idealist, then nothing materialist can be derived from a simple inversion, since idealism inverted remains idealism. But in that case, Marxism cannot be rescued simply by declaring Marx to have been a naive or "unconscious" Kantian, since the very structure of the Marxist method will have been shattered.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the somewhat paradoxical fact remains that Marx himself certainly believed not merely in the abstract possibility of extracting the "rational kernel" from within the mystical Hegelian shell, but that he had actually accomplished that task in the construction and application of the materialist dialectic.<sup>9</sup> One might, then, legitimately question whether there may not be other dimensions to Hegel's philosophy which betray a certain one-sidedness in the familiar picture painted of the Hegelian system, aspects which could have provided Marx with a justification for "standing Hegel right side up." This paper will examine whether there are, in fact, valid epistemological and methodological grounds for the extraction of a materialist dialectic from Hegel's own idealist system.

*The Epistemological Foundation of Marx's Dialectical Method:  
Hegel's "Science of Logic"*

While Hegel was an idealist, he was, more importantly, an objective idealist, that is, one who granted an independent, objective existence to ideas outside the subjective mind of the indi-

6 Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel*, tr. Lawrence Garner (London, 1973), pp. 7-27.

7 See, for example, the judgment of Sebastiano Timpanaro, *On Materialism*, tr. Lawrence Garner (London, 1975), pp. 248, 251.

8 For the "Kantianization" argument, see Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel*, pp. 113-138. See also Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, tr. Jeremy Shapiro (Boston, 1971), pp. 7-63, for a different but complementary argument.

9 Karl Marx, "Letter to Ludwig Kugelmann, June 27, 1870," Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow, 1975), p. 225 (Marx and Engels, *Werke* [Berlin, 1961], XXXII, p. 686 [hereafter cited as MEW]).

vidual thinker. In contrast to the subjective idealists, epitomized by Kant, for whom the chaotic existence of empirical reality is given coherence, structure and intelligibility by means of the subjectively operating categories of the mind, the Hegelian conception affirmed the structuredness and coherence of empirical reality independently of the human mind, although this intelligibility rested upon the assertion of an independently existing Idea, Spirit, or Consciousness. However, once the independent existence of a coherent, structured reality is conceded, the door is left open for the undermining of the entire idealist system. In the first place, philosophy, and knowledge generally, is historicized and socialized: "Whatever happens, every individual is the child of his time; so philosophy is its own time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overleap his own age, jump over Rhodes."<sup>10</sup> And Hegel certainly does not exempt his own work from the social and cultural constraints of his own age. Thus, shortly before his death, he made the following assessment of his youthful *Phenomenology of Spirit* and its projected republication: "Strange early work, not to be revised, — belonging to the time of its composition — in the Preface: *the abstract Absolute* reigned then."<sup>11</sup>

Hegel furthermore took pains to emphasize that the atomization characteristic of civil society was at one and the same time a result of objective social conditions which had led to the loss of that sense of community and social and spiritual integration which he thought so characteristic of Greco-Roman Antiquity,<sup>12</sup> and the tendency of contemporary philosophy to ontologize the resulting appearance of a reality torn apart in opposition and contradictoriness. This condition was rendered seemingly immutable in philosophy's dogmatic counterposing of the dichotomous relations of being and nothing, subject and object, finite

10 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, tr. T.M. Knox (Oxford, 1952), p. 11 (Hegel, *Sämliche Werke*, ed. Hermann Glockner [Stuttgart, 1955], VII, p. 35 [hereafter cited as SW(G)]).

11 Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* (Hamburg, 1980), IX, p. 448 (hereafter cited as GW). Unless otherwise noted, emphases are in the original.

12 See, for example, "The Positivity of the Christian Religion," *Early Theological Writings*, tr. T.M. Knox (Chicago, 1948). For detailed expositions of the development of Hegel's thought, see Lukács, *The Young Hegel*, tr. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, 1975), Raymond Plant, *Hegel* (Bloomington, 1973), and H.S. Harris, *Hegel's Development: Toward the Sunlight, 1770-1801* (Oxford, 1972).



and infinite, form and content, appearance and essence, phenomenon and noumenon, etc. By simply replicating or reflecting in thought the atomization of social reality, philosophy had abrogated its true task, the attempt to demonstrate the possibility of reconciliation within civil society through the reconciliation of philosophical oppositions.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, it is precisely "[w]hen the power of union vanishes from the life of people, and the oppositions have lost their living connection and reciprocity, and attain independence, that the need for philosophy arises."<sup>14</sup> In fact, knowledge (*Wissen*) is "[t]his conscious identity of the finite and the infinite, the union of both worlds, the sensuous and the intellectual, the necessary and the free, in consciousness . . . ."<sup>15</sup> But the achievement of the desired harmony could not be the externally imposed identity of reflection, which achieves unity by upholding one side of the dichotomy against the other, subject against object, phenomenon against noumenon, appearance against essence, the finite against the infinite. For that would be a false unity achieved at the expense of merely denying that aspect of reality which appears in its phenomenal form of opposition and contradictoriness.<sup>16</sup> Even Hegel's later search for a resolution of existential oppositions in the realm of the infinite Absolute becomes, paradoxically, an absolute affirmation of the objective reality of concrete, material finitude, that is, the world of empirical social reality. For to deny the objective reality of the latter is to deny the power of the infinite Absolute to resolve opposition by internalizing or re-collecting and sublating the "merely" finite, thus admitting its impotence and subjection to the finite. Consequently, social reality cannot be denied in Hegel's system. On the contrary, its affirmation is the necessary precondition for the resolution of opposition in self-consciousness.<sup>17</sup> Thus, rather than attributing the chaos and atomization of social existence to the natural structurelessness of the objective empirical world or to the categories that render it intelligible, they are taken as the manifestation of the actual con-

13 Hegel, "Differenz des Fichte'schen and Schelling'schen Systems der Philosophie," *GW*, IV, pp. 12-14.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

17 Cf. "Jenaer Systementwürfe II," *GW*, VII, p. 143, and *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller (Oxford, 1977), pp. 354-355, 368 (*GW*, IX, pp. 315-316, 327-328).

ditions of social existence. Indeed, the very tasks of philosophy are set by the historical and social conditions themselves.

In his earliest works Hegel sought, in sharp contrast to his later works, the resolution and transformation of the contradictions of civil society<sup>18</sup> within the world of social reality itself. This is brought out most clearly in "The Positivity of the Christian Religion," in which Hegel seeks to recapture the political and moral activism of the ancient Greeks, and contrasts their sense of political and spiritual freedom with the quietism of Christianity, which relinquished any sense of individual moral and political action to a non-human, divine being, "while men looked on passively."<sup>19</sup> If the atomization and oppositions of civil society were ever to be resolved, the quietism engendered by Christianity had to be replaced by something much closer to the Greek ideal, which saw "the state as a product of the citizen's own energies" in which existed "[f]reedom to obey self-given laws, to follow self-chosen leaders in peacetime and self-chosen generals in war, to carry out plans in whose formulation one had one's share."<sup>20</sup> (For Hegel, of course, Napoleon had been the concrete embodiment of the "world soul," whose task was precisely this reconciliation.<sup>21</sup>)

The extraordinary tension in Hegel's works between the desire to apprehend accurately the very structure of human existence in civil society, with its oppositions, contradictions and atomization, and the need to provide a metaphysical resolution to this condition invests the system with an internal dynamic that not even Hegel is able to control. The result is that Hegel's system succeeds in reaching the pinnacle of absolute idealism while, at the same time, shattering itself against the materiality of empirical social reality. And it is in this irreconcilable contradiction that the precondition for the construction of a materialist, Marxist dialectic is to be found.

18 Civil society, for Hegel, is characterized by atomized, particularized and self-seeking individuals. See *Philosophy of Right*, pp. 122-123, 266-267 (SW(G), VII, pp. 262-263): "In civil society each member is his own end, everything else is nothing to him" (*Ibid.*, p. 267 [p. 263]). See, also, *Encyclopaedia*, III, tr. W. Wallace and A.V. Miller (Oxford, 1971), pp. 256-257 (SW(G), X, pp. 400-401).

19 "The Positivity of the Christian Religion," p. 158 (*Hegels theologische Jugendschriften*, ed. Herman Nohl [Tübingen, 1907], p. 224).

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 157, 156 (p. 223).

21 *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg, 1952), XXVII, pp. 119-121.



The search for a resolution to objective oppositions in and the atomization of civil society finds its direct manifestation in Hegel's ontology, epistemology, methodology, and logic. This search led Hegel beyond the preoccupation with the externally juxtaposed and mechanically related dichotomous categories of his predecessors and contemporaries. It was Hegel's great contribution to point out the necessary structural interconnection of what appeared on the surface of reality to be completely separate and distinct elements. What took the form of dichotomy and opposition was the result of a determinate and necessary relationship existing beneath the surface manifestation. Thus, in contrast to the Kantian conception, Hegel argued for the inseparability of the object of thought and the forms of thinking, or logic. The reasons for this are quite clear:

... it is quite inept to say that logic abstracts from all *content*, that it teaches only the rules of thinking without reference to *what* is thought or without being able to consider its nature. For as thinking and the rules of thinking are supposed to be the subject matter of logic, these directly constitute its peculiar content; in them, logic has that second constituent, a matter, about the nature of which it is concerned.<sup>22</sup>

For the contrary assumes "that the material of knowing is present on its own account as a ready-made world apart from thought, that thinking on its own is empty and comes as an external form to the said material, fills itself with it and only thus acquires a content and so becomes real knowing."<sup>23</sup>

No less is the method through which human existence is apprehended in thought inextricably linked with its subject matter. In fact, the structure and dynamic movement of the content itself constitutes the method. The method

is not something distinct from its object and content; for it is the inwardness of the content, the dialectic which it possesses within itself, which is the mainspring of its advance. It is clear that no expositions can be accepted as scientifically valid which do not conform to its simple rhythm, for this is the course of the subject matter itself.<sup>24</sup>

22 Hegel, *Science of Logic*, tr. A.V. Miller (London, 1969), p. 44 (hereafter cited as *Logic*), (*Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Georg Lasson [Hamburg, 1923], III, p. 24 [hereafter cited as *SW(L)*]).

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*, p. 54 (p. 36).

The method, then, is equally an ontology, an epistemology, and a logic. These seemingly distinct categories attain their unity in the dialectic, which is at work "wherever there is movement, wherever there is life, wherever anything is carried into effect in the actual world."<sup>25</sup>

In Hegel's discussion of the unity of being and nothing we find perfectly expressed, although in highly abstract terms, the *form* of the dialectical method.<sup>26</sup> While pure "being" is found to be pure "nothing" by virtue of its utter contentlessness and lack of determination and mediation, "nothing," by the same token, is equally "being" insofar as it also is pure contentlessness, immediacy and indeterminacy. The very fact that "nothing" is distinguished from "something" imbues it with a qualitative characteristic, that is, it is a form of existence or "being." Yet the unity of the two categories is not simply a mechanical summation of the qualities of each. On the contrary, they exist as identical yet completely separate and contradictory moments or aspects within a new category, "becoming." "Becoming," therefore, is the result of the mutual annihilation or negation of the original empty or contentless and static categories of pure being and pure nothing, the effect of which is both to preserve the mutually annihilated categories and unite them in a dynamic and more concrete, content-filled, and therefore mediated and determined category of being.<sup>27</sup> The same process forces the succeeding categories into ever more concrete and mediated determinations, which come to reflect increasingly precisely the actual dynamics, structure and interrelatedness of the real world.<sup>28</sup> "Determinate being" (*Dasein*), that category into which "becoming" has transformed itself, "is concrete; consequently a number of determinations, distinct relations of its moments, make their appearance in it," or, in other words, it is "being with a limitation or negation."<sup>29</sup>

The elaboration of the structure of "determinate being" and its transcendence into the "Doctrine of Essence" — the second

25 Hegel, *Encyclopaedia*, I, tr. W. Wallace (Oxford, 1975), p. 116 (SW(G), VIII, p. 190).

26 *Logic*, pp. 82-83 (SW(L), III, pp. 66-67).

27 "Determinateness" refers to the specific quality of any given form of concrete being which characterizes it as uniquely its own. *Encyclopaedia*, I, p. 134 (SW(G), VIII, p. 217).

28 Cf. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 51 (GW, IX, p. 57).

29 *Logic*, pp. 110, 101 (SW(L), III, pp. 97, 87).



major division of the *Logic* — is the heart of Hegel's onto-logic. It is the working out of the dialectical method and structure in its most determinate, mediated and concrete form.<sup>30</sup> But this dynamic process is not an artificially derived movement engendered by a formalistic and merely external juxtaposition of opposing categories. On the contrary, it is an immanent movement arising from the very self-relatedness of the categories themselves: their self-contradictoriness propels them from one level to another.<sup>31</sup> Thus "being" is, in fact, "nothing," and this self-contradiction can only be resolved in a new category of existence, "becoming." But while this new form of being resolves the initial contradiction, it does so not by abolishing contradictoriness itself, but by raising it to a higher and more concrete form. This new form then engenders a new process in its attempt to resolve the resulting self-contradiction. "[T]he truth," says Hegel,

is rather that a consideration of everything that is, shows that *in its own self* everything is in its self-sameness different from itself and self-contradictory, and that in its difference, in its contradiction, it is self-identical, and is in its own self this movement of transition of one of these categories into the other, and for this reason, that each is in its own self the opposite of itself. The Notion of identity, that it is simple self-related negativity, is not a product of external reflection but has come from being itself. Whereas, on the contrary, that identity that is aloof from difference, and difference that is aloof from identity, are products of external reflection and abstraction, which arbitrarily clings to this point of indifferent difference.<sup>32</sup>

Hegel's *Logic* presents a uniform process of *movement* from one category to another in which the very structure of the categories themselves provides the dynamic momentum. On the ontological level, this creates the impression of an equally uniform, immanent, natural, and lawlike transition from the most abstract, contentless, immediate, and indeterminate forms of existence (being, nothing) to the most concrete, content-filled, mediated, and determinate forms (determinate being), and back to

30 "Concrete" is used in its technical sense of at one and the same time providing the principle of unity while possessing "an internal source of development." *Encyclopaedia*, I, pp. 19-20 (SW(G), VIII, p. 60).

31 *Logic*, pp. 439-443 (SW(L), IV, pp. 58-62).

32 *Ibid.*, p. 412 (SW(L), IV, p. 27).

the most abstract ontological sphere of the absolute Idea of the "Doctrine of the Notion." It is this extrapolation from the inherent dynamic of the categories to the imputedly necessary transition from one point to another in an ontological circle that has been the source of the neo-Marxist rejection of the Hegelian dialectic, the argument centering as it does upon equating the uniformity of the dialectical movement with Hegel's ontological idealism. However, the relationship between the dialectical *movement* and the idealist ontological *structure* is by no means as close or homogeneous and uniform as either Hegelians or neo-Marxists presume.

In fact, the *Logic* presents us with an uncharacteristically undialectical ontological duality, the irreconcilability of which, on the one hand, stands as an admission of Hegel's failure to construct a unified ontology, epistemology, logic, and method on idealist premises, and, on the other, provides the epistemological and methodological Archimedean point for its inversion and transformation into a uniquely Marxist dialectic. Hegel takes great pains to stress that the very structure and content of the categories, as well as the *form* that their dialectical movement takes, in the abstract sphere of the infinite Absolute, are qualitatively different from those that apply to the concrete sphere of the finite. Hegel insists that

... nowhere in heaven or on earth is there anything which does not contain within itself both being and nothing. Of course, since we are speaking here of a particular *actual something*, those determinations [i.e., being and nothing] are no longer present in it in the complete untruth [i.e., abstractness and contentlessness] in which they are as being and nothing; they are in a more developed [i.e., concrete] determination, and are grasped, for example, as positive and negative, the former being posited, reflected being, the latter posited, reflected nothing; the positive contains as its abstract basis being, and the negative, nothing.<sup>33</sup>

While such purely abstract categories as "being" and "nothing" exist on every ontological level, the specific *form* that they take differs according to the degree to which they are imbued with — or lack — actual content, concreteness, determinateness, and mediation. In fact, continues Hegel, if, in the ordinary commonsense understanding of things, we jump directly from

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85 (SW(L), III, pp. 69–70).



the immediate, abstract, contentless categories of "being" and "nothing" to concrete, determinate, mediated "particular actual somethings" and draw the inference that on this latter level being is, in actual fact, nothing, we will find ourselves making the obviously nonsensical assertion that it is a matter of indifference whether, for example, "this house is or is not, whether these hundred dollars are part of my fortune or not."<sup>34</sup> Thus, the meaning of the proposition that being is non-being or nothing, is completely altered when applied to such concrete categories as "this house" and "these hundred dollars."

The proposition contains the pure abstractions of being and nothing; but the application converts them into a determinate being ["house," "hundred dollars"] and a determinate nothing. But as we have said, the question here is not of determinate being. A determinate, a finite, being is one that is in relations to an other; it is a content standing in a necessary relation to another content, to the whole world. . . . In the instances adduced against the proposition in question, something appears as not indifferent to whether it is or is not, not on account of being or non-being, but on account of its *content*, which brings it into relation with something else. If a specific content, any determinate being, is *pre-supposed*, then because it is *determinate*, it is in a manifold relationship with another content; it is not a matter of indifference to it whether a certain other content with which it is in relation is, or is not; for it is only through such relation that it essentially is what it is.<sup>35</sup>

In fact, "[t]he genuine criticism of the categories and of reason is just this: to make intellect aware of this difference and to prevent it from applying to God the determinations and relationships of the finite."<sup>36</sup> Hegel insists most emphatically that what

34 *Ibid.* It is precisely such absurdities that anti-Hegelians accuse dialectical logic of inevitably leading to. Clearly, that is based on a less than serious attempt to understand Hegel. For example, great amusement is derived from the Hegelian denial of the law of (non-)contradiction, that it involves both the affirmation and the simultaneous denial of the *actual existence* of something ('A' both is and is not 'A' simultaneously). The answer is, of course, that this inference is illegitimate and a complete absurdity, a judgment which Hegel would share completely. This highly abstract, contentless proposition would take a very different form when applied to actual, concrete categories. For example, in its most concrete form, the commodity is simultaneously both a use-value and a non-use-value (exchange-value), and can only function as a commodity on the basis of such an "illogical," self-contradictory objective nature. See Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York, 1970), p. 42 (MEW, XIII, p. 28).

35 *Logic*, p. 86 (SW(L), III, pp. 70-71).

36 *Ibid.*, p. 90 (p. 75).

constitutes proof on one level is qualitatively different from that on another: "Proof is, in general, *mediated cognition*. The various kinds of being demand or imply their own kind of mediation, so that the nature of proof, too, will differ in respect to each."<sup>37</sup> Later, in the section on "Actuality," Hegel again stresses the ontological duality: "each [i.e., "being" and "essence"] is a totality within itself but a determinate totality."<sup>38</sup> The purpose, then, of the dialectical method "is to study things *in their own being and movement* and thus demonstrate the finitude of the partial categories of understanding."<sup>39</sup> The radical ontological distinction between the finite, actual, concrete sphere of social reality and the infinite, other-worldly, spiritual realm of absolute Idea, Spirit, or God, brings with it a corresponding epistemological and methodological distinction.

The lengthy preceding passage is Hegel's response to Kant's refutation of the ontological proof of God in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>40</sup> In the first place, it is clear that Hegel does not deny Kant's ontological duality. But this concession is made only on the assumption that a sufficient number of mediating links can be established to demonstrate the ultimate connectedness of the two realms, resulting in the dialectical sublation of the finite by the infinite. Yet this necessary resolution is never consummated. Hegel is clearly aware that the solution sought in the category of the "Idea" cannot be justified on its own terms, but depends for its validation upon merely referring *back* to the preceding unfolding of the dialectic from pure abstract "being" through "determinate being" and "essence." But it is precisely the ontological leap from the finite realm of concrete, content-filled social reality to the infinite realm of the abstract Absolute which demands scrupulous demonstration and proof. The validity of the Idea, which is, precisely, characterized by immediacy, contentlessness and indeterminacy, cannot be subject to demonstration, since proof is mediated cognition and thus limited to the realm of the finite. Hence,

37 *Ibid.*, p. 481 (SW(L), IV, pp. 102-103). See, also, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 39 (GW, IX, p. 45).

38 *Logic*, p. 530 (SW(L), IV, pp. 157-158).

39 *Encyclopaedia*, I, p. 117, emphasis added (SW(G), VIII, p. 191).

40 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Norman Kemp Smith (London, 1967), pp. 500-507.



It is too late now to ask for proof that the Idea is the truth. The proof of that is contained in the whole deduction and development of thought up to this point. The idea is the result of this course of dialectic.<sup>41</sup>

Up to the point at which the "Idea" is introduced, the determinate ontological principle has been contradiction and self-contradiction. This is abruptly abolished with the introduction of the "Idea," which serves as that category which miraculously resolves all ontological contradictions by fiat.<sup>42</sup> But since it is precisely the principle of contradiction "that is contained in the whole deduction and development of thought up to this point," its very absence in the "Idea" stands as proof of the latter's falseness. It is the endpoint of Hegel's search, formulated in "Differenz des Fichte'schen und Schelling'schen Systems der Philosophie," for a resolution in the realm of thought of the concrete oppositions, contradictoriness and atomization of civil society. It remains, however, a specious resolution.

The seeds of a realist and materialist epistemology are thus to be found imbedded in Hegel's objective idealism — in its irreconcilable ontological duality — and this crypto-materialism is given its full ontological autonomy *vis-à-vis* the predominating idealism. This clearly undermines Colletti's contention that Hegel's system involves the reduction of philosophy to an idealist gnoseology which demands the unreality of matter. Colletti's critique merely reasserts the original Kantian refutation of the ontological proof of God, to which Hegel responded by unequivocally reaffirming the irreducibility of the reality of finite material existence to the infinite contentless realm of the abstract Absolute. Although it is true that Hegel, in the "Doctrine of the Notion," attempts to subsume the finite under the infinite, this is achieved not by denying the reality of the material social world, but by successively abstracting away the content of the categories until only pure, empty abstractions remain. Thus it is precisely the validity of the dialectical method as it arises out of and is reapplied to social reality which denies the fundamental tenet of objective idealism. Rather than facilitating the annihilation of the finite by the infinite through a dialectical *deus ex machina*, it is the

41 Hegel, *Encyclopaedia*, I, p. 276 (SW(G), VIII, p. 425).

42 Cf. Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p. xii.

objective existence of irreconcilable contradictions and oppositions in the actual social world that denies their resolution in the metaphysics of idealism. The only way the resolution can be achieved is by abstracting away the very determinations, mediations, content, and concreteness that establish the contradictions in the first place. Hegel's "solution" succeeds only at the expense of suspending the dialectic itself.

Having suggested that the elements of a realist, materialist dialectic already exist in Hegel's system, it is necessary to turn to Marx's critique of Hegel's idealism in order to establish not only what Marx rejected and why, but precisely where the intersection of the two methods occurs which enabled Marx to construct his method out of the elements left by Hegel.

#### *The Materialist Dialectic and Marx's Critique of Hegel*

Marx settled his accounts with Hegel between 1843 and 1846, when he wrote *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, and in collaboration with Engels, *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology*. This critical period was crystallized in the eleven *Theses on Feuerbach*, which cleared away the brush for the first fully materialist formulation of the dialectical method, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847).<sup>43</sup>

It is clear from even a cursory examination of Marx's works precisely what his critique of Hegel's philosophy entails. Marx has no great quarrel with Hegel's objective description of actual human relations, which in some respects accurately enough reflects the conditions of bourgeois society. Hegel not only "very often gives a *real* presentation, embracing the *thing* itself, within the *speculative* presentation," but, more emphatically, "gives in many instances [in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*] the elements of a true description of human relations."<sup>44</sup> Rather, Marx, *via* Feuerbach, accuses Hegel of contriving a resolution to real social contradictions by transforming them into mere ideas, categories, which then achieve their reconciliation through the postulated Absolute Spirit, Idea, or Knowledge.

43 See the autobiographical statement in Marx's "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, pp. 19-23 (MEW, XIII, pp. 7-11).

44 Marx and Engels, "The Holy Family," *Collected Works* (New York, 1975), IV, pp. 61, 193 (MEW, II, pp. 63, 205).



In Hegel's *Phenomenology* the *material, sensuously perceptible, objective* foundations of the various estranged forms of human self-consciousness are allowed to *remain*. The whole destructive work results in the *most conservative philosophy* because it thinks it has overcome the *objective world*, the sensuously perceptible real world, by transforming it into a "Thing of Thought," a mere *determinateness of self-consciousness*, and can therefore also dissolve its opponent, which has become *ethereal*, in the "ether of pure thought." . . . He stands the world *on its head* [by equating all reality with mere human self-consciousness] and therefore *in his head* also dissolve all limitations, which nevertheless remain in existence *for bad sensuousness, for real man*.<sup>45</sup>

It is after all Hegel who contends that the purpose of philosophy is to "recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present and thereby to enjoy the present, this is the rational insight which reconciles us to the actual, the reconciliation which philosophy affords. . . . There is less chill in the peace with the world which knowledge supplies."<sup>46</sup>

Marx's critique is repeated in the Afterword to the second edition of *Capital*, a passage often quoted and more often misunderstood by those "reading" *Capital* in a highly tendentious and idiosyncratic manner. Here Marx explains more clearly the precise distinction between his method and Hegel's. "To Hegel," Marx argues, "the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking which, under the name of 'the Idea,' he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of 'the Idea.'" For Marx, on the other hand, "the Ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought." But Marx is quick to point out that the "mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell."<sup>47</sup> Marx can therefore accept the validity of the dialectical method in its materialist form insofar as

45 *Ibid.*, p. 192 (pp. 203-204). See also, Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," *Collected Works*, V, p. 30 (MEW, III, pp. 19-20).

46 Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 12 (SW(G), VII, pp. 35-36).

47 Marx, *Capital* (New York, 1967), I, pp. 19-20 (MEW, XXIII, p. 27).

it is a reflection and manifestation of the actual, objective dynamic of social and historical change, the truly revolutionary import of which lies in its demonstration of the transitoriness of social systems, that capitalism, contrary to the contention of bourgeois ideologues, is not an immutable system ordained either by God or by nature.<sup>48</sup>

It was, therefore, not the dialectical conception of society that was conceived by Hegel as an attempt merely to rationalize a political quietism, as the price for making his peace with bourgeois society, but on the contrary, the actual contradictoriness of social life itself which impelled Hegel to seek its resolution in the realm of ideas instead of in revolutionary praxis. It was precisely Hegel's idealist *solution* which was imbued with reactionary political implications, not his formulation of the actual contradictoriness of bourgeois society.<sup>49</sup>

Marx, therefore, literally turns Hegel's epistemology around:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men — the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men at this stage still appear as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of the politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc. of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc., that is, real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being, and the being of men is their actual life-process. . . . It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness.<sup>50</sup>

The result, then, of Marx's critique of Hegel is two-fold. On the one hand, Marx clearly accepts the fundamentally anti-Kantian epistemological realism that lies at the very foundation of Hegel's dialectic. That is, both Hegel and Marx share the epis-

48 *Ibid.*, p. 20 (pp. 27–28), Marx, "Letter to Ludwig Kugelmann, March 6, 1868," *Selected Correspondence*, p. 187 (MEW, XXXII, p. 538).

49 For the mistaken view that the Hegelian dialectic is inherently reactionary, see Paul Gottfried, "On the Social Implications and Context of the Hegelian Dialectic," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 41 (July–September 1980), pp. 421–432.

50 Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," pp. 36–37 (MEW, III, pp. 26, 27).



temological assumption of an objective, intelligible world whose structure, dynamic, and coherence are independent of the subjective ideas — or categories — of the individual human mind. Both consequently rejected the Kantian view of an essentially instrumental human mind whose categories imposed a structure upon the objective world, but in so doing could only render intelligible the surface manifestation, or the phenomenal appearance, of the world of sense objects, leaving ungraspable the essential nature of that world (noumenon, thing-in-itself).<sup>51</sup> Hegel's solution was to demonstrate the complex interrelationship between knower and known, subject and object, and in so doing to eradicate the naive dichotomy between the two elements. It is clear that Marx accepted this fundamental epistemological tenet. An unbroken thread runs from Marx's earliest writings to his very last formulations of this question. He consistently reaffirms the twin epistemological principles of realism and materialism, the second aspect of his critique. It is a veritable axiom of Marx's that an objective external world exists independently of the human mind, and that this objective, material world structures and, indeed, determines the very ideas and concepts which we have of that world. Thus, in 1846, Marx argued that

Still less has he [Proudhon] understood that men, who produce their social relations in accordance with their material productivity, also produce *ideas, categories*, that is to say, the abstract ideal expressions of these same social relations. Thus the categories are no more eternal than the relations they express. They are historical and transitory products.<sup>52</sup>

Some twenty years later, Marx reiterates the same point:

[Proudhon] shares the illusions of speculative philosophy for he does not regard *economic categories as the theoretical expression of historical relations of production, corresponding to a particular stage of development in production*, but arbitrarily transforms them into pre-existing *eternal ideas*, and that in this roundabout way he arrives once more at the standpoint of bourgeois economy.<sup>53</sup>

51 For Kant's view, see *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp. 439-449.

52 Marx, "Letter to P. V. Annenkov, December 28, 1846," *Selected Correspondence*, p. 36 (MEW, XXVII, p. 459).

53 Marx, "Letter to J. B. Schweitzer, January 24, 1865," *Selected Correspondence*, pp. 144-145 (MEW, XVI, p. 28).

In the same way, Marx argues that "[t]he categories of bourgeois economy . . . are socially valid, that is, objective forms of thought expressing the relations of production of this historically determined social mode of production, i.e., commodity production," and "[e]conomic categories are only the theoretical expression, the abstractions of the social relations of production."<sup>54</sup> The same objective existence therefore characterizes contradictoriness: "If . . . such expressions . . . appear contradictory, this is only because they bring to the surface a contradiction immanent in capitalist production."<sup>55</sup> And just as Hegel grounded the individual thinker in his own time and place, so, too, for Marx, the bourgeois economist "remains a captive of the economic categories as he finds them," just as unable to transcend the limits of bourgeois ideology as Hegel's thinker is unable to leap over Rhodes.<sup>56</sup>

While the affirmation of materialism is constantly placed at the fore in Marx's works, with the question of epistemological realism remaining in the background, the two aspects are brought together in one of Marx's last, and perhaps epistemologically most important, works, "Marginal Notes to Adolph Wagner's *Textbook on Political Economy*." Marx forcefully attacks the Kantian epistemological instrumentalism or conventionalism and idealism of such bourgeois political economists as Wagner and Rodbertus.<sup>57</sup> Its virtual unfamiliarity in the English-speaking world justifies quoting it at some length.

Who places things in logical opposition? Herr Rodbertus, for whom "use-value" and "exchange-value" are both by nature "concepts." In fact, every single kind of commodity goes through this illogical process of differentiating itself in every price list as *good*, *use-value*, as wool, yarn, iron, corn, etc., of presenting itself as distinct in every respect from all other commodities as a qualitatively different "good," but at the same time as qualitatively equivalent *prices*, but quantitatively differ-

54 Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 76, translation modified (MEW, XXIII, p. 90); Marx, "The Poverty of Philosophy," *Collected Works*, VI, p. 165 (MEW, IV, p. 130).

55 *Capital*, I, p. 214 (MEW, XXIII, p. 228).

56 Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (Moscow, 1971), III, p. 254 (MEW, XXVI/3, p. 250); Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, p. 11 (SW(G), VII, p. 35).

57 There is a certain irony in using this work as an example of Marx's great debt to Hegelian epistemology, since Althusser cites it as one of two works "totally and definitively exempt from any trace of Hegelian influence" (*Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, p. 94, emphasis in original).

ent forms of the *same essence*. Every commodity presents itself in its natural form to each one who uses it, and on the basis of which it differentiates itself completely, as possessing a common *value-form* in relation to all other commodities, that is, as *exchange-value*. Here the question is one of a "logical" opposition only for Rodbertus and his associates among the German professorial schoolmasters, whose point of departure is the "concept" value, not the "social thing," the commodity, and who let the concept split itself, and then fight over which of the two chimeras is the real thing!<sup>58</sup>

On the contrary, for Marx concepts such as "value" and "use-value" are the manifestations in thought of actual social and historical conditions. Particularizing the general statement in *The German Ideology*, Marx explains the relationship between concept and reality:

What lies in the dark recesses of the pompous phrases, however, is simply the immortal discovery that man, under all conditions, must eat, drink, etc. (one cannot simply continue: clothe himself or have knives and forks or beds and dwellings, since this would not be the case *under all conditions*); in short, that under all conditions he finds external things existing in nature for the satisfaction of his needs, and takes possession of them or must fashion them out of naturally existing things; in this his actual activity, he thus stands in an actual relationship to definite external things such as "use-value," i.e., he treats them continually as objects for his use; but for Rodbertus use-value is a "logical" concept, but by no means "physiological." The whole shallowness of Rodbertus reveals itself in the opposition he sets up between "logical" and "historical" concepts! . . . Had he examined value further, he would furthermore have discovered that this thing, the use-value, exists as the mere *objectification (Vergegenständlichung)* of human labor, as the *expenditure of equivalent human labor*, and therefore this content is presented as the *objective* nature of the thing, as the nature to which it *itself* belongs objectively, although this objectification (*Gegenständlichkeit*) does not appear in its natural form (which is what makes a specific *value-form* necessary). Consequently, he would have discovered that the "value" of a commodity is expressed only in an historically developed form, something which likewise exists in all other historical forms of society, albeit

58 Marx, "Randglossen zu Adolph Wagners 'Lehrbuch der politischen Ökonomie'," *MEW*, XIX, pp. 374-375. See also Marx's comment in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 30 (*MEW*, XIII, p. 18): "This reduction appears to be an abstraction, but it is an abstraction which is made every day in the social process of production," i.e., an abstraction that occurs objectively, in the real world, and not merely mentally.



*in a different form, namely, as the social nature of labor, insofar as it exists as the expenditure of "social" labor power. The "value" of the commodity is thus only a definite historical form of something, which exists in all forms of society, hence also the "social use-value" as it characterizes the "use-value" of the commodity.*<sup>59</sup>

It would, however, be erroneous to believe that Marx is suggesting a simple unilinear relationship between the objective world and the concepts and categories derived from it. While it is true that he affirms a materialist epistemology by which concepts are derivative, he certainly does not suggest that ideas may not have a tremendously important effect on the objective conditions of human existence. On the contrary,

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. . . . A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of the labour process a result is obtained, which, from the very beginning, already existed in the imagination of the labourer, that is, which already existed ideally. He not only affects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which he must subordinate his will.<sup>60</sup>

What Marx is discussing here is the concrete relationship between theory and practice, i.e., the tenet that if man is to change the world he must first have an adequate conception of it, as well as a picture of what he wishes to create.<sup>61</sup> But this is not the same

<sup>59</sup> Marx, "Randglossen," pp. 375-376.

<sup>60</sup> Marx, *Capital*, I, pp. 177-178, translation modified (MEW, XXIII, pp. 192-193). See also, Engels, "Letter to Joseph Bloch, September 21-22, 1890," *Selected Correspondence*, pp. 394-396 (MEW, XXXVII, pp. 462-465).

<sup>61</sup> This is, perhaps, a more accurate interpretation of Marx's "Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach": "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways, the point, however, is to *change* it." On the relationship between the epistemological and the theory-practice problems, see the "First Thesis on Feuerbach." Marx and Engels.

question as the epistemologically antecedent one concerning the origin and development of our concepts. In fact, the way Marx formulates and solves the theory-practice problem is derived from his epistemological position.<sup>62</sup>

### *Marx's Dialectical Method and the Hegelian Inversion*

Without anticipating what must be the topic of a subsequent essay, it is possible to show schematically precisely how Marx's

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*Collected Works*, V, pp. 3–5 (MEW, III, pp. 5–7). It would, however, be incorrect to interpret Marx's remarks in the "First Thesis" as an attempt dialectically to unite materialism and idealism; he is criticizing the inadequacies of mechanical materialism by showing the necessity of integrating certain elements developed in idealism. In making this critique, Marx in no way suggests a departure from a materialist stance. I would thus completely disagree with Derek Sayer's formulation of this question in *Marx's Method: Ideology, Science and Critique in "Capital"* (Atlantic Highlands, 1979).

- 62 This epistemological realism, accepted by Hegel as a methodological *conditio sine qua non*, has long been dismissed as an example of non-scientific, metaphysical thinking in the social sciences. It has only been comparatively recently, in the wake of the crisis in the philosophy of the natural sciences beginning in the late 1950s, that epistemological realism has regained a certain credence even in that discipline. Yet a clear parallel exists between the conceptual realism of Hegel and Marx and the overthrow of the old Aristotelian-Ptolemaic world view by the Copernican-Galilean. As the Ptolemaic system became increasingly untenable, the scientific-religious establishment attempted as best it could to "save the appearances" by constructing increasingly complex and elaborate conceptual and geometric models that might serve to patch together a theory flying apart at the seams. To achieve at least minimal credibility and persuasiveness, the models were assumed not necessarily to be accurate representations of physical reality or even to have any necessary physical referents; they were presented as "merely" abstract conceptual or heuristic devices. This seems to be a phenomenon that arises in times of intellectual crisis, serving as a means for propping up a world view which is about to become obsolete. Albert Einstein argued that one of the fundamental characteristics of both the hypothesis of the center of the universe, rejected by Galileo as an adequate explanation of falling heavy bodies, and the hypothesis of an inertial system, rejected by Einstein as an adequate explanation of the inertial behavior of matter, is that each assumes a conceptual object which is not taken to be real and, while it is supposed to determine the behavior of real objects, is not itself affected by them. "The introduction of such conceptual elements," concluded Einstein, "though not exactly inadmissible from a purely logical point of view, is repugnant to the scientific instinct" (Albert Einstein, "Foreword" to Galileo Galilei, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, tr. Stillman Drake [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967], p. xiii. See also, Dudley Shapere, *Galileo: A Philosophical Study* [Chicago, 1974], pp. 66–68, 120–121; Jerome J. Langford, *Galileo, Science and the Church*, rev. ed. [Ann Arbor, 1971], p. 29n.).

The direct equivalent of the attempt to save the appearances by introducing conceptual devices increasingly divorced from objective reality, to the point of denying conceptual or epistemological realism, is found in the social sciences as well. The point is that when this form of thinking becomes the dominant characteristic of inquiry, we enter the realm of ideological thinking. Marx was the first to explain fully

critique of Hegel's idealism and its transformation into a dialectical materialist epistemology has translated itself into Marx's method in *Capital*. What at first appears to be a tangential methodological point relegated to a footnote in *Capital*, reveals itself, when read in its more clearly elaborated version in the *Grundrisse*, to be a precise statement concerning the distinction between, and the point of intersection of, the Hegelian and Marxist methods. Marx is, in effect, presenting a summary of the dialectical materialist method when he notes that

Technology discloses man's mode of dealing with Nature, the process of production by which he sustains his life, and thereby also lays bare the mode of formation of his social relations, and of the mental conceptions that flow from them. Every history of religion, even, that fails to take account of this material basis, is uncritical. It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion, than, conversely, it is to develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding celestialised forms of those relations. The latter method is the only materialistic, and therefore the only scientific one. The weak points in the abstract materialism of natural science, a materialism that excludes history and its process, are at once evident from the abstract and ideological conceptions of its spokesmen, whenever they venture beyond the bounds of their own specialty.<sup>63</sup>

But the methodological significance of this note is somewhat obscure. It takes a reading of the introduction to the *Grundrisse* to appreciate fully the significance of this methodological point.

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx contrasts two methods and explains why only one of them is truly scientific. The first of these would take as its point of departure, in the study of economics, the population as a whole, since it presumably forms the fundamental precondition for the existence of any social system of production. But remaining on this abstract level of analysis can only lead to theoretical error:

The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn, are an empty phrase if I am not familiar with the elements on which they rest. E.g., wage la-

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this phenomenon in his conception of ideology. The most obvious contemporary equivalent is to be found in the premium placed on abstract mathematical modeling in the social sciences.

63 Marx, *Capital*, I, pp. 372n-373n (MEW, XXIII, pp. 392n-393n). Cf., Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," p. 36 (MEW, III, p. 26).



bour, capital, etc. These latter in turn presuppose exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage labour, without value, money, price, etc.<sup>64</sup>

In contrast, Marx presents a second method, which he takes to be the only scientifically correct one. Rather than taking as his point of departure such a chaotic, undifferentiated, and ahistorical conception of the whole as "the population" pure and simple, the scientist must successively break down this undifferentiated, abstract whole to yield those categories that form the simplest determinations of the whole.

From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of the whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations. . . . As soon as these individual moments had been more or less firmly established and abstracted, there began the economic systems, which ascended from the simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market. The latter is obviously the scientifically correct method. The concrete is concrete because it is the determination of many determinations, hence the unity of the diverse.<sup>65</sup>

Marx consequently begins the first volume of *Capital* with an examination of the commodity precisely because it is, in the capitalist system, both the simplest determination of bourgeois social relations and that category within which the "totality of many determinations and relations" are concentrated.

If the first method Marx describes seems familiar, it is because it is nothing other than the empirical correlate of Hegel's ontological journey from "being" and "nothing" to "determinate being." The difference in the two methods, and in their empirical points of departure, is highlighted in Hegel's reason for taking as his starting point the pure, abstract, and contentless category of "being":

. . . the reason why the beginning cannot be made with anything concrete, anything containing a relation *within itself*. . . [is that such a beginning] presupposes an internal process of mediation and transition of which the concrete, now become simple, would be the result. But the

64 Marx, *Grundrisse*, tr. Martin Nicolaus (New York, 1973), p. 100 (*Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie [Rohentwurf]* [Berlin, 1953], p. 21).

65 *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101 (p. 21).

beginning ought not itself to be already a first *and* an other; for anything which is in its own self a first *and* an other implies that an advance has already been made. Consequently, that which constitutes the beginning, the beginning itself, is to be taken as something unanalysable, taken in its simple, unfilled immediacy, and therefore *as being*, as the completely empty being.<sup>66</sup>

It is clear that Hegel's starting point is dictated by his need to demonstrate that the materially concrete is derived from the most abstract, contentless, and indeterminate categories. This is the only point of departure possible for a system constructed upon idealist premises. And it is precisely this that Marx attacks both in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*. For Marx, it is the abstractions which are determined by and arise from the concrete relations of the material world, not the other way around. Hence, the only valid method has to be one that starts from the ground up, from concrete social materiality, and proceeds successively and architectonically to the most abstract elements whose connections to the material world are less manifest. Marx therefore starts out with the commodity precisely because it is the most concrete — the simplest, most elementary — social form of the capitalist relations of production.<sup>67</sup> As such, it is quintessentially both "a first *and* an other," representing in the most concrete form both the essence of production and its opposite — its "other," its appearance or phenomenal form — i.e., exchange relations or circulation.<sup>68</sup> The whole social structure of bourgeois reality, with all its mediations, contradictions, interconnections, and self-relations is represented in all its multifaceted complexity and concreteness in that most social and political of categories, the commodity.

What for Hegel are the defects in taking as one's point of departure concrete categories, are such only from an idealist conception. From a materialist vantage point, they represent the fundamental strengths, the ground and bedrock, of the dialectical materialist method. It is precisely in passages such as this that we find the meaning of Marx's "enigmatic" characterization of his method as the "direct opposite" of Hegel's, that he has

66 Hegel, *Logic*, p. 75 (SW(L), III, p. 60).

67 Marx, "Randglossen," p. 369-370 Cf *Capital*, I, pp. 113-114 (MEW, XXIII, pp. 127-128).

68 Marx, "Letter to Engels, June 27, 1867," *Selected Correspondence*, p. 179 (MEW, XXXVII, p. 313).

turned Hegel "right side up," accomplished the inversion of Hegel's objective idealism, and discovered the "rational kernel within the mystical shell." Whereas Hegel derives the concrete from pure, contentless, transhistorical abstract being, Marx begins with the concrete in order to derive its various phenomenal, mystified, fetishized, and abstract forms. In both cases, however, the dialectic remains the methodological centerpiece.

But what gives the dialectic its impetus and momentum, and thus characterizes it as dialectic, is the notion of determination. In fact, the final sentence in the last passage from the *Grundrisse* quoted above, in which Marx defines the essential nature of the concrete in terms of determination, is virtually identical to Hegel's characterization of "determinate being."<sup>69</sup> Since the concrete is concrete to the extent to which it possesses an internal source of development,<sup>70</sup> the same holds true for the dialectic, which is that very movement and development itself. Consequently, it is incorrect to equate the essence of the Marxist method with the notion of "totality."<sup>71</sup> Although it is an extremely significant category, its origin in the "Doctrine of Being" of the *Logic* implies that it is one of the most abstract and universal of Hegel's categories, and, therefore, insufficiently concrete, particular, and historical to serve as the basis for distinguishing Marx's concrete, materialist method from Hegel's objective idealism. Nor can the category of "mediation" serve that function, important though it certainly is in Marxism.<sup>72</sup> While it originates in the more concrete and particular category of "determinate being," it nevertheless lacks the required specificity and concreteness which might permit it to serve as the basis of Marx's dialectic. The same is true, *a fortiori*, of the category of "relations," which, it has been argued, ought to serve that function.<sup>73</sup> Conse-

69 Hegel, *Logic*, p. 110 (SW(L), III, p. 97); see above, p. 44.

70 Hegel, *Encyclopaedia*, I, pp. 19-20 (SW(G), VIII, p. 60); see above, note 30.

71 Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism?" *History and Class Consciousness*, pp. 1-26. See, for instance, the thoroughly abstract definition of dialectical method offered by Lukács: "... the essence of the dialectical method lies in the fact that in every aspect correctly grasped by the dialectic the whole totality is comprehended and that the whole method can be unravelled from every single aspect" (*Ibid.*, p. 170).

72 Lukács, "Moses Hess and the Problems of Idealist Dialectics," *Tactics and Ethics: Political Essays, 1919-1929*, ed. Rodney Livingstone (New York, 1972), pp. 181-223, and *History and Class Consciousness*, pp. 162-182; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, tr. Hazel Barnes (New York, 1968).

73 Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 58-71.



quently, the only category that can fit the requirement is "determination," since it provides the basis for grounding the dialectic in the materiality of social reality. Indeed, so thoroughly was it grounded in the concrete social world, that not even Hegel could free it and elevate it into the realm of the infinite. The specifying characteristics listed in the passage from the *Grundrisse* are precisely determinations of this type.

### *Conclusion*

One of the keys to understanding the relationship between the Hegelian and the Marxist dialectic is to be found in one of Hegel's own remarks in the *Lesser Logic*: "the limitations of the finite do not merely come from without . . . , its own nature is the cause of its abrogation, and . . . by its own act it passes into its counterpart."<sup>74</sup> The very limit beyond which Hegel's formulation cannot pass provides the presupposition for its abolition, transcendence, and further development by Marx. That limit is the dialectic itself. In Hegel's own work, the need to demonstrate the nature of the mechanism of social development and change as objectively and concretely as possible, made it quite impossible to transform this quintessentially social dynamic into a justification for the objective existence of a transcendental ontological realm. Thus, rather than being an inextricable part of Hegelian idealism, the dialectic, in fact, serves to deny or negate the very premises of Hegel's idealism: in order to transform the finite into the infinite, the concrete material dialectic arising out of civil society must be denied and abolished; Hegel's system, by its idealist premises, depends for its completion upon the ultimate denial of the very mechanism which Hegel must rely on for its attainment. Only a dialectical process could possibly, if only in principle, succeed in transforming the ontologically finite realm into the realm of the infinite absolute. But in order to complete that system on idealist premises, the concrete social materiality out of which the dialectic has arisen and by which it attains its dynamic movement, must be abstracted away.

Out of this objectively determined irreconcilable contradiction springs the Marxist materialist dialectic. Hegel's inability to transcend the ontological duality of the finite world of social

<sup>74</sup> Hegel, *Encyclopaedia*, I, p. 116 (SW(G), VIII, p. 190).

reality and the realm of the transcendental infinite absolute, provides the basis for the transformation of the idealist form of the dialectic into a materialist Marxist formulation. Hegel's failure to break the inextricable link between the social, material conditions and the dialectical mechanism which they ground, determine and render operative, permits the formulation of a method which is itself determined by those social conditions and equally autonomous of any idealist, transcendental realm. All this lies immanent in the very structure of Hegel's *Logic*.

Marx's task, therefore, was to show that what Hegel had fashioned into an idealist promise of reconciliation was, in its innermost determination, a method arising out of the material conditions of bourgeois existence, the revolutionary implications of which were to deny the natural necessity and immutability of bourgeois relations of production, to bring to the surface the inherent contradictions of that system, and to reveal the hidden Archimedean point through which the system could be overthrown. And this task involved, almost as a side-issue, a fundamental reformulation of the bases of human knowledge, premised upon a realist and materialist epistemology.

More generally, Marx's epistemological contribution might be better understood by placing it in relation to the Kantian and Hegelian conceptions of what was to count as human experience and how it was to be apprehended as knowledge. Without presenting a detailed analysis, it is apparent that Kant, taking as his point of departure the radical empiricism of Locke and Hume, sought to delimit the bounds of human experience to coincide with its narrowest and most superficial level, immediate sense experience ("intuition"). Such a limitation was necessary, given Kant's preeminent concern with rescuing the realm of religious faith from the ravages of Humean skepticism: "I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*."<sup>75</sup> Kant's solution was to constrict what was to count as human experience in order to subordinate it to the realm of religious faith. His task was to set the boundaries around a very narrow aspect of experience and to construct criteria and typologies which would show us how far we could go in gaining knowledge without encroaching upon the realm of religion. This involved taking as human experience *tout court* the mere manifestations of

<sup>75</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 29.



an alienated, atomized, unintegrated, and fundamentally irreconcilable existence in bourgeois society, beneath whose phenomenal surface human reason was incapable of delving: in order to rescue faith, man himself had to become atomized and dichotomized, living as he did in two ontologically distinct worlds, the sensible world of appearance and the higher world of duty and morality.<sup>76</sup>

For Hegel, the inadequacy of the Kantian ontologization of man's alienated existence in civil society pointed him toward a different solution. The search for the lever which would abolish the epistemological and ontological dichotomization and atomization of alienation forced Hegel to reconceptualize the very nature of human experience. For him it was defined not by an instrumentally conceived reason that imbued the external world with an intelligible structure, but rather as an immanent relationship between knower and known, subject and object, a process which made accessible to human consciousness levels of experience far deeper than the merely phenomenal, immediate sense impressions. Rather than trying to keep artificially separate the different strands of human experience and knowledge, Hegel grasped their essentially dynamic movement and inter-relatedness. Experience and knowledge were not static conditions that could fit into eternal and immutable tables and schemata. The dialectical mechanism that provided this dynamic momentum became fully accessible only with the most concrete analysis of human existence in society. In contrast to Kant's abstract analysis of the conditions of human experience and knowledge in general, which was undialectical precisely because it was removed from the concrete conditions of history and social existence,<sup>77</sup> Hegel, as we have seen, could only have discovered this dialectical mechanism, not by willing it into existence, but by means of a detailed and concrete analysis of human history and social existence.

Yet, whereas Kant was content to create ontological dualities and Hegel to try to bridge them, their failure pointed to a third approach, that of Marx. Here the very duality itself was tran-

76 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Lewis W. Beck (Indianapolis, 1956), pp. 88-89.

77 Although the need for achieving a unity of the realms of pure reason and practical reason is clearly acknowledged in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, tr. J.H. Bernard (New York, 1951), p. 12.



scended by grasping that whatever value was to be found in Kant's and Hegel's systems came from those grains of epistemological realism and materialism that lay buried within the shell of their idealism. Thus Marx further grounded their dialectic more fully into the material conditions of human existence, while at the same time constricting its legitimacy to the world of finite, concrete reality. Hegel's discovery of a complex and multilayered world of human experience and knowledge was taken over by Marx, but with the difference that their historical and social-material determinants were fully explained and elaborated. Marx concretized this simultaneous vertical expansion and horizontal contraction of the experiential in his formulation of the problem of commodity fetishism. Thus the inversion of Hegel was complete.

But it was an inversion of a more profound sort as well, a political inversion. For the first time in bourgeois society, a thoroughly self-conscious class politics became possible with Marx's grounding of a proletarian political practice directly in the conditions of social existence themselves. In one historical instant, both the irrationality of Kantian moral action, grounded in mere faith in an ultimately unknowable noumenal free will, and the Hegelian substitution of the possibility of revolutionary action by the action of the absolute Idea, were radically transformed. The pre-history of mankind was coming to an end; the self-conscious construction of a new society would now be possible, not in the fantastic deployment of Hegelian category-systems or by the vain assertion of an ungraspable categorical imperative, but in the concrete relationships of concrete individuals to their concrete conditions of existence. And central to this practice was the ability to grasp the revolutionary consequence of a thoroughly materialist dialectic.

*Department of Political Science  
University of California, Los Angeles*